

HOW TO PRACTICE

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Most singers realize practice should be a part of their routine, but questions arise: What to practice? And just as important, how to practice? Improper practice can prevent a singer from improving and can even be harmful to the voice. Having goals and a systematic approach to achieving them can make all the difference. So let's look at practice routines and the art of "deliberate practice".

Warm Up

Keep in mind that every day, a singer must readjust the subtle balances necessary to singing. This is why so few of us can sing well in the morning or after a prolonged period of not singing. Warming up should be looked at like stretching before a gym workout. A common mistake singers make is singing too loudly before going through the steps of warming up and finding proper vocal coordination.

During your warm-up, the idea is to increase the flexibility of your ligaments and muscles while also reducing the thickness of your vocal folds (cords). These thinner, more agile vocal folds are necessary to optimal singing. Some favorite exercises singers use for this purpose are humming on scales and doing glides up and down on vowel sounds such as "oo" and "ee". Whatever exercises you prefer, make sure you work the voice lightly through a wide range of pitches. Longer scales work very well. Keep

it light and easy, but still strive for pitch accuracy. You are not only getting the area warmed up; you are also beginning to process the fine-tuning the coordination necessary for pitch making. These are both essential for the next stage of practice.

Work Out

Now you should move on to vocaleises, which are exercises used to acquire specific skills. Here is where the real training begins. Once your instrument has been recalibrated and warmed up, you are ready to start targeting specific areas of the voice. Again, it is not a good idea to go for power right away, as this can throw off the coordination you have been gently working on. This portion of your session should

be concerned with vocal quality, which would include sustained notes, . and the fine-tuning of vowels and resonance.

Begin to systematically work on your problem areas; Vocal issues such as breaks, unsteadiness, and so on should be addressed. To keep re-establishing your sense of balance, alternate between harder exercises and ones you find easy.

Only after the voice has been stabilized and properly worked should you worry about power and volume. Most vocal problems stem from a singer using brute force with an unbalanced instrument.

More Power, Scotty

Once you've worked on agility, range, and quality of tone, you can

begin to work on singing more strongly. Holding sustained notes and crescendoing is a great way to do this. You can also work on your previous vocalises with greater intensity. Never force the voice, and always use balance and ease as your measuring stick. If your voice tenses up at any point, back off the volume. Power should always be the last thing you focus on, as it is an extension of precise vocal stability. Think of the grace and agility of a powerful athlete; this should be our goal as well.

Sing, Sing a Song

Now you can move on to song work. Here is where we can take a cue from instrumentalists. A pianist or guitarist will rarely just play a song from beginning to end while letting mistakes fly by; rather, he or she works small sections slowly in order to get them “under the fingers”. Singers who don’t play an instrument now have available to them not only a wide selection of prerecorded tracks but also software that can change the key or tempo of a track. This way the singer can isolate a difficult section and work it at a speed or in a key that’s comfortable. Work a song lightly the first few times to identify the trouble spots, then isolate and perfect those sections. Don’t let the little details escape your notice. Wagner famously told his singers, “Pay attention to the small notes; the big notes will take care of themselves.”

Recording

One of the primary functions of the voice teacher is to provide the singer with feedback. In practice, you can begin to do this for yourself by using a recorder. Listening back to portions of your practice can be extremely helpful, especially if you’re unsure whether you’re doing an exercise or phrase correctly. Because of the way the voice’s elements interact; small changes in vocal production can yield huge differences in result. This recorded feedback can help you track down these small imbalances that otherwise often escape your awareness. Plus, we hear ourselves differently than the rest of the world does, which is why our recorded voice often sounds foreign to us.

Analyze and Adjust

The old adage “Practice makes perfect” has been updated by some to the more correct “Practice makes permanent. Perfect practice makes perfect.” What is perfect practice? It is what researchers refer to as deliberate practice.

British researchers recently studied people who excel in field that can be measured in terms of skill. They looked at sports, chess, and music, and what they found was that rather than having an abundance of natural talent, these leaders all practiced in a similar manner: consistently and deliberately. In fact, there is debate among researchers as to whether talent is a factor or even exists at all.

The typical amateur golfer will take a bucket of balls out to the driving range and swing away. This type of practice has no specific goal and no precise measurement or

result. The golfer is therefore unable to make the changes necessary for improvement. In deliberate practice, the golfer would have the goal of, say, landing the ball in a certain area. He or she would then adjust after each and every swing based in its outcome.

A typical singer may run a few scales and then sing through a few songs – again, with no clear goals or system of analysis. But a session of deliberate practice would consist of specific goals: for example, sustaining higher pitches with proper vibrato or working a tricky section of a song on an “oo” sound in order to remove any tension. The singer would then need to analyze the result and make specific changes based on that analysis.

Not More, But Better

Most people who take up an instrument or a sport learn quickly in the beginning. Learning soon slows down, however, and at a certain point most people no longer improve even if they continue the activity. The mistake many make when hitting this wall is to increase the quantity of their work. Unfortunately, they’re usually just doing more of the same thing. There is no improvement because there is no change in technique or skill level.

Deliberate practice will improve the quality of a singer’s practice rather than simply the amount. You will be able to see consistent improvement and can eventually achieve a skill level that will set you apart from the competition.

Talent?

One of the more amazing conclusions researchers have drawn is that people are not born with innate abilities in certain fields, that greatness simply does not exist without years of consistent hard work.

There is a reason so few of us are great at something: because the work necessary is so painstaking that very few will have the discipline to practice in this manner. Patience is also mandatory, as the minimum amount of time it takes to become world-class at something is usually about 10 years. But the good news is that greatness is available to all of us, not just to those who are seemingly blessed with supernatural talent. Working both hard and smart can make you a singer people flock to hear.

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